RELAPSE: NOTES ON TOM COHEN'S WORK, PART 1

The first in an ongoing series of formalizations of the work of Tom Cohen.

FEB 07, 2021

6 1 Share

In order to approach the work of Tom Cohen, let us take one relatively simple node to begin with: 'relapse'. Cohen is perhaps primarily known as a theoretician of climate change and other cardinal plasticities, but the proposition here will be that his work's main focus is something like *ubiquitous relapse*.

Where the theorisation of the anthropocene is sometimes criticised for its narrow range, we can look to Cohen for a wider and more shockingly *material* scape. 'Critical climate change' for him (together with Claire Colebrook) names a whole set of geo-morpho-graphic mutations beyond 'ecology' and 'environmentalism' as we tend to think them. It also names intra-psychic and sub-aesthetic motifs such as 'occlusion' and, crucially, 'relapse'.

For Cohen, a 'relapse'—and the addiction undertones are undeniable—is a moment when cultural or ideological trends opt out of the ferocious materiality of the state of the 21st century world, lapsing back into the safety mechanisms of 20th century norms just at the moment when something more severe is happening and being called for.

If the reader requires immediate cultural examples here, think of everything from 'normcore', 'the new normal', 'The Great Reset', and 'Build Back Better', to ironic Xi Dada memes, Chinese Fetishism, Quantic Ecology and theories of The Stack that all pretend in their own way—relapse itself—that we have an upcoming horizon of world-time to fall back on.

Now, the point is that even the most dialectically strained and radical theories of the present (from Benjamin Bratton to Frank Wilderson to Yuk Hui to Nick Land) would seem to go down under the meta-critical hammer of what Cohen might call 'ubiquitous' retro-normativity.

The constant recourse in economic speak any time between 2007 and 2011 to the idea that recovery had now taken place or will take place, when in fact more dips (however invisible) were not just inevitable but installed into hyper-capital's irreal architecture for good, was perhaps, whether we like it or not or choose to see it or not, the primary analogue for every aesthetic instance in the present.

In his essay 'Anecographics', Cohen proposes a situation in which we 'might regard the entirety of critical culture today as strangely spellbound and, as such, not entirely disconnected from the relapses we witness on the political, international, mediacratic, and cultural fronts'. The implications of this remain to be fully thought though—even as they are now felt. They could not and would not quite lead to a relinquishment of art, to the phantom of something called 'post art', not at least de facto—but there is a *narrowing*. A Bolito-effect kicks in around aesthetic production, life and living modes themselves.

The word signalling ubiquity in the just quoted is of course 'entirety'. It is the 'entirety of critical culture today' that is held in a kind of proto-genetic blind and bind, what Cohen also calls a *grand mal d'archive*. The relapse-state and relapse-space is without outside or inside, because it is all interiority from one imagistic end to self-imaging other. The prognostic dimensions arising from such a thought are evidently self-fatal: since there is no ideograph, bail-point or ontological panic room that would escape the relapse-state and the relapse-space, then the state and space would be *primarily* self-folding. They would bespeak a collapse the like of which it would be impossible for us to imagine an equivalent, per definition. Such a collapse is in fact quantic—there is no other way of accounting for something this vast and self-involuting, a baroque infinity of complicity that goes much further than letting nobody off the hook or individual responsibility. We are pre-bored or rather -thrilled by what might be

called an *ubilapse*.

There is at least one Cohen essay that is singularly useful for thinking through the motif and fine art of relapse, 'The Philotechnic Blind: Ubiquity, Relapse, Mutation (Notes on Bernard Stiegler's "Nanomutation")'. The triad plus one to be found here is immediately talismanic:

- Relapse.
- Philotechnology.
- Ubiquity.
- The nano-.

Following Heidegger's 'The Turning' text, Cohen describes and circles a *tie*—a further fold of complicity—between technology, relapse and love (which is to say, between screen addictogenesis, immense innovation and obsession). Once the human goes into a fully modern technic mode, it also goes into a fully involuted or baroque relapse-state and relapse-space. The 'blind' ('philotechnic blind') Cohen will constantly zoom in on in essays spanning back at least two decades, and soon to be gathered in a crucial and sizeable trilogy called *Ecocide and Inscription*, is also a 'bind', a blind that binds and ties us blindly, a linkage here self-implicating technics, ubilapse and the nano on a single architraval dashboard.

The expectation will be that ubilapse (ubiquity + relapse) will take place and is taking place right now in the fold of aesthetic-state detail, where the nano- may denote nano-war as much as the filling out of what Cohen calls 'the climate change unconscious' with caches and pockets of disintegrating resistance.

Ubilapse and relapse are porous as well as ana-architectural. Like the Swiss Cheese diagrams sometimes used in eternal inflation theory, the geometry implied by Cohen's work is something like a quantum square root of collapse in a still artefactual and social consciousness. Here is one of the moments where everything folds in:

> Since social and ideational exchange tends to be a management of conscious hypocrisies, this produces a generalized *climate change 'unconscious'* that can be read everywhere, at all points, less stuffed into individual psyches than played out in the still public spaces marked by occlusion. One must discard the Enlightenment tropology, of course, which assumed that 'climate change' was a shocking secret that science, bringing to light, would foist on societal governance to address—as if 'enlightened self interest' were the market's desideratum.

There is no reason why this enormously 'public' occlusion should be kept out of the psychic envelope, which after all hardly remains successfully purged in the present. Cohen elsewhere refers to 'mass ressentimentalization', which is to say that the architectonics of the ubilapse-space are squeezed by intractable forms of granular and digital envy. The essays of Cohen, which now urgently require a formalisation, set out in their way a theory of Heideggarian *Gestell* as a kind of phenomenology of the internet. The essence of technology that is not technological, which is a definition of *Gestell*, is also way of thinking about the internet, if we strip away our usual terms and visors. 'The internet' marks an immense and plastic squeezing moment in the overall workings of ubi-lapse regimes: occlusion, relapse, ubiquity, envy-effects, the failure of Enlightenment tropologies, survivor-guilt, success-guilt, and their mergers.

In 'The Philotechnic Blind' a kind of ultimatum-point comes in the series of knots making up this ongoing body of work, their interruption and their summation and formalization. Here an almost direct ratio is introduced between technical sophistication and hermeneutic relapse. Just as in Derrida's reading of Flaubert, even the notion of synthetic 'genius' and its freedom in oncoming artificial intelligence would be here scoped in advance by the *grand mal* of the ubilapse. 'Genius' as a node is right next to 'stupidity' on the dashboard, and that would count for the most advanced systems of 'internet' capture and so-called 'censorship' as well. The farthest reaches of artificial general intelligence would themselves already be writing themselves out in ubilapsing spasms:

> There is something stunning about the fact that the greatest sophistication in

> tracking contemporary teletechnologies coincides with a relapse simultaneously into the most precritical positions of asserted or affirmed immediacy, presence, body, lived experience.

What is 'stunning' here is not that teletechnological descriptions—Cohen will partly mean 'the internet'—relapse, but that this relapse takes place at a rhythm worn into being by the advance of technic progression itself. Again, the architecture may be imagined: the more technical features are added to the facades of sensorial and aesthetic regimes, the more blind-spots become quantum, proliferating into and outward towards invisible domains (the transcendental crash-space of the blinds). Since this is indeed 'stunning', let us say it again: the ubilapse general virus is precisely the formal x-point whereby the greatest technical sophistication coincides, in granular terms, with the largest quanta of relapse. Ubilapse would be indifferent to either the style or quality of the 'content' put up as 'new'—the *Mona Lisa* could be said to be in state of relapse as much as the January 6th Capitol gambolers or the King of Spain.

Ubilapse is so dimensionally scandalous that you could say that the one thing that, for example, a quantumly defined new ecological science of the Universe in terms of generic 'extinction' ignores is finitude qua finitude i.e. granularity. Ubilapse is a flat, invisible bind. Like Khora itself, it fields reservations. Take a work as radical as Ray Brassier's *Nihil Unbound* and one may easily notate there, as it were, a nihil bound. What ublilapse calls back, almost emptily, like a computer turning itself on, is what Cohen's work on Paul de Man names *sheer materiality*, which is to say, inscription as naked surface itself. Again, from this point of view, which is hardly one, it is not that critique is automated in the direction of the dismissal of names, but that a lookback is afforded from a future position. The news from the 22nd century available now is that bitcoin, quantum time, 'black pessimism', communism, a new science of ecology, will all have been a series of cruel optimisms, or details of the ongoing self-formalizing ur-lapse.

1 Comment

Write a comment...

matthew: Apr 21, 2022 · *edited Apr 21, 2022* ♥ Liked by angelicism01

it wasn't until a day after I read this that I realized I had actually met Tom years ago at a Benjamin conference. Tom and I were the only ones to present via powerpoint rather than reading from a paper (something I vowed almost 30 years ago never to do again). Also, I had only just heard of Willardson 12 hours before reading this because a friend of mine works with him at UCI. hope this helps

LIKE (1) REPLY SHARE

© 2024 angelicism01 · Privacy · Terms · Collection notice
Substack is the home for great writing